



Human Intelligence in Counterinsurgency: Persistent Pathologies in the Collector-Consumer Relationship

by Michael Gallagher

The very essence of counterinsurgency is the collection of intelligence for the government.¹

-Lucian W. Pye, 1964

Eight years into the war in Afghanistan, the U.S. intelligence community is only marginally relevant to the overall strategy.²

-Major General Michael Flynn et al., 2010

In the realm of counterinsurgency (COIN), the currency is intelligence. In other words—as the Counterinsurgency Field Manual succinctly puts it—intelligence drives operations.³ “Good” intelligence provides precision, helping the counterinsurgent eliminate insurgents from the populace “like surgeons cutting out cancerous tissue while keeping other vital organs intact.”⁴ Within this surgical effort, Human Intelligence (HUMINT) proves uniquely valuable; it can obtain information that more technologically-oriented assets cannot.⁵ Thus, while all counterinsurgents collect operational reporting as they perform their daily functions—what is frequently termed “passive” collection—HUMINT requires “active” collectors who are specially trained to conduct military source operations and interrogations.⁶

Yet counterinsurgency doctrine is impoverished with respect to the role of HUMINT. Paradigmatic works pay lip service to the importance of HUMINT in general but offer few concrete lessons for commanders or collectors in particular.⁷ In this essay I aim to fill this gap. I

¹ Lucian W. Pye, “The Roots of Insurgency,” *Infernal War*, ed. Harry Eckstein (New York: Free Press, 1964), 177.

² Michael T. Flynn, Matt Pottinger, and Paul D. Batchelor, “Fixing Intel: A Blueprint for Making Intelligence Relevant in Afghanistan,” Center for New American Security (January 2010): 7.

³ “The ultimate success or failure of the mission depends on the effectiveness of the intelligence effort.” The Army-Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual (FM 3-24), www.fas.org/irp/doddir/army/fm3-24.pdf (accessed March 10, 2011), 79.

⁴ FM 3-24, 41.

⁵ I use the definition of HUMINT contained in FM 3-24, which is as follows: “The collection of information by a trained human intelligence collector from people and their associated documents and media sources to identify elements, intentions, composition, strength, dispositions, tactics, equipment, personnel, and capabilities.”

⁶ FM 3-24, 121.

⁷ For example, John Nagl criticizes his own early work for paying “ritual obeisance to the importance of intelligence in counterinsurgency operations” without recognizing the full practical implications of this “canard”. John Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya to Vietnam* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2002), xiii. David Kilcullen’s seminal “Twenty-Eight Articles: Fundamentals of Company-level Counterinsurgency” argues that most intelligence will come from operators themselves. As such he recommends that the infantry company must “organize for

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argue that counterinsurgency doctrine fails to recognize that the most critical element of HUMINT work is not the relationship between a source and his handler, but rather the relationship between a HUMINT collector and his supported operational consumer.⁸ This collector-consumer relationship suffers from eight persistent pathologies that engender mistrust within the counterinsurgent force and therefore warrant closer examination.

The “Office Space” Pathology

“What would you say...ya *do* here?”⁹ This question—taken from the 1999 movie *Office Space*—conjures up a dysfunctional employer-employee relationship in which the purpose and value of both sides are misunderstood. Within the context of counterinsurgency, it signals the presence of a pathology that begins to take root in the earliest stages of the collector-consumer partnership. Indeed, to the commander considering how to employ his HUMINT assets, counterinsurgency doctrine poses an interesting puzzle. HUMINT *collection* is the sine qua non of counterinsurgency success. Its value is clear and inarguable. HUMINT *collectors*, however, seem less essential. Their value is opaque and debatable. As counterinsurgency increasingly relies upon open (vs. sensitive) sources¹⁰ doctrine dictates that HUMINT collection responsibilities are best left to others. Passive HUMINT collection is the province of operators or civilian agencies¹¹ while specialized HUMINT collection is most effectively conducted by local police¹² or “conflict ethnographers.”¹³ In a counterinsurgency environment, where “nonstandard HUMINT reporting, such as meeting and patrol debriefs, is [in some cases] the primary form of intelligence for an area,”¹⁴ the relevance of the specialized HUMINT collector

intelligence” by placing smart operators in the S2 and R&S sections. However, he offers no HUMINT specific recommendations.

8 Consumers come in many forms, but for the purposes of this essay, “operational consumer” refers to the infantry battalion—specifically the battalion, company, and platoon commanders—that the collector—or a team of collectors such as the Marine Corps HUMINT Exploitation Team (HET) or the Army’s HUMINT Collection Team (HCT)—is tasked to support.

9 This is the question posed by Bob Slydell to Tom Smykowski. Tom’s response evinces the HUMINT collector’s defense of his relevance: “Well look, I already told you! I deal with the goddamn customers so the engineers don’t have to! I have people skills! I am good at dealing with people! Can’t you understand that? What the hell is wrong with you people?”

10 See David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 293.

11 FM 3-24, 41. Of the nine potential sources of human intelligence that the manual identifies, all are the province of passive collectors. These nine sources include: (1) patrol debriefings and after-action reviews, (2) civil affairs reports, (3) psychological operations reports, (4) special operations forces reporting, (5) leadership liaison, (6) contracting, (7) multinational operations centers, (8) tips hotlines, and (9) U.S. persons.

12 In his landmark Counterinsurgency Warfare, David Galula argues that “specialized” HUMINT work, or as he terms it “identifying, arresting, interrogating the insurgent political agents,” is primarily a police and judicial task. Only when the police force is undermanned or unreliable must the military assume the “nonmilitary” function of “gathering intelligence on the insurgent’s political agents.” However, this democratization of HUMINT responsibilities has limits. Only the police—or a special police force established in the absence of extant, trustworthy police—should interrogate suspected agents, according to Galula. See David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 1964), 61, 66, 87. John Nagl argues that in any counterinsurgency campaign, local forces or host-nation partners have an inherent advantage in collecting HUMINT over outsiders. Local forces are not limited by language barriers nor encumbered by the enormous weight of trying to understand tribal dynamics, local patterns of behavior, and political associations. The advantages that outsiders can offer these local forces are largely technical, such as communications assets or air support. The foreign counterinsurgent can offer little expertise regarding HUMINT collection. Nagl, xiv-xv. See also, Walter L. Perry and John Gordon IV, *Analytic Support to Intelligence in Counterinsurgencies* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2008): 15.

13 Kilcullen, “Chapter 11: Intelligence,” in *Understanding Counterinsurgency: Doctrine, Operations, and Challenges*, ed. Thomas Rid and Thomas Keaney (New York: Routledge, 2010):155. These “conflict ethnographers” would be charged with “developing well-founded relationships of trust with key informants—along with the fundamental ethical responsibility to protect those informants and advocate for their safety and well being.”

14 Kyle Teamey and Jonathan Sweet, “Organizing Intelligence for Counterinsurgency,” *Military Review* (September/October 2006), 26. A more extreme version of this argument comes from LTG Samuel V. Wilson, who posits that “ninety percent of

is not immediately apparent. As this pathology begins to take hold, the collector becomes little more than a nuisance, an unnecessary drain on operational resources.¹⁵

Further, the commander who has the temerity to ask his HUMINT specialists to collect the cultural, political, or economic information critical to the counterinsurgency effort is often met with the following reply: “we don’t collect atmospherics.”¹⁶ By saying this, the collector doesn’t mean to reject the doctrinal model whereby requirements drive collection. Rather, he is arguing that his time is not well spent monitoring the protean sentiments of the host-nation populace, reporting a daily list of local concerns, or describing the 1,000 year history of tribal conflict in the region. This reflexive response is not entirely unwarranted. The HUMINT collector represents a low-density, high-demand asset, one that should be carefully and selectively employed to collect against intelligence requirements that cannot be answered by passive collectors.¹⁷ If this is not clearly understood, HUMINT will suffer from “errant, opportunistic tasking.”¹⁸ More broadly, counterinsurgency may shift or blur the line between operational information and intelligence information, but the threshold between the two still exists and necessitates dedicated professional collection. This is particularly true in an information environment saturated with un-vetted information, where professional HUMINT collectors are critical to ensuring that information quantity does not supplant information quality.¹⁹

Yet while “atmospherics” may seem like a dirty word to the collector, providing “insight into cultures, perceptions, values, beliefs, interests and decision-making processes of individuals and groups” is a fundamental imperative of counterinsurgency.²⁰ If the HUMINT collector is too specialized and too valuable to collect such information, then precisely what is his value (what would he say...he does here)? Analysts struggle for months, sometimes years, to assemble intelligence products that accurately depict tribal and political associations in their area of operations. Depending on source placement and access, the well-trained HUMINT collector can acquire this information in a series of well-planned source meets. The resulting HUMINT report—provided it is well-written and incorporates outside analysis—may advance the cause of the counterinsurgent farther than those providing locations of insurgent weapons caches.

intelligence comes from open sources. The other 10 percent, the clandestine work, is just the more dramatic. The real intelligence hero is Sherlock Holmes, not James Bond.” Quoted in Flynn et al., 23

15 From an Army perspective: “This proves very frustrating to the Infantryman; the only time he interacts with the HCT is when he is tasked to escort them to source meetings, the information from which may not even concern his area of operations (AO). To make matters worse, in terrain where weather and distance hamper timely transportation between outposts, such as Afghanistan, or heavily IED’d lines of communication” Lines of Communication” is an episode from the fourth season of the science-fiction television series Babylon 5. Synopsis

Franklin and Marcus attempt to persuade the Mars resistance to assist Sheridan in opposing President Clark.

..... Click the link for more information. restrict regular movement, such as certain parts of Iraq, an HCT’s circulation to all company AOs is often severely hobbled.” David Beall, “HUMINT Heresies: the Disposition of Human Intelligence Collection in Counterinsurgency,” Military Intelligence Professional Bulletin (April 2009), <http://www.thefreelibrary.com/The+HUMINT+heresies%3A+the+disposition+of+Human+Intelligence+collection...-a0228278573> (accessed August 1, 2010).

16 Another way of describing this rejection of “atmospherics” is that “some intelligence officers contend that „white“ topics are not intel”s job but the responsibility of civil affairs and stability staffers.” Flynn et al., 22.

17 This is easier to see at the strategic level. For example, John MacGaffin, talking about CIA worldwide collection, goes even farther: “Clandestine HUMINT should only be employed when it is clear that no other option is available or has a real possibility to succeed.” See “Clandestine Human Intelligence: Spies, Counterspies, and Covert Action,” in Transforming U.S. Intelligence, ed. Jennifer E. Sims and Burton Gerber (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2005), 80.

18 MacGaffin, 80.

19 I would like to thank Michael Tomai for suggesting this point.

20 FM 3-24, 80.

Thus, by categorically rejecting what he considers “atmospherics” information in favor of enemy-centric information, the HUMINT specialist not only risks irritating the supported commander who now questions HUMINT’s relevance—thereby triggering the *Office Space* pathology—but also contributes to a larger phenomenon whereby U.S. troops wage anti-insurgency rather than counterinsurgency.²¹ Lacking environment-centric information, or that “based on dominating the whole district and implementing a solution to its systemic problems”, the consumer is forced into the reactive and often counterproductive focus on killing or capturing insurgents.²² In other words (to steal another *Office Space* image) the counterinsurgent force is distracted by “TPS Reports”—seemingly endless intelligence products that do nothing to address the main effort, the needs of the local community.

The “Jedi Mind Trick” Pathology

Intelligence professionals in general confront inflated consumer expectations. Reflecting on the Central Intelligence Agency’s (CIA) flawed advice leading up to the Bay of Pigs operation, President Kennedy memorably summarized this point: “If someone comes in to tell me this or that about the minimum wage bill, I have no hesitation in overruling them. But you always assume that the military and intelligence people have some secret skill not available to ordinary mortals.”²³ From this stems the (faulty) normative presumption that “not only is the truth out there but that it should be always knowable.”²⁴ These exaggerated expectations can be damaging insomuch as they produce an exaggerated disgust with intelligence failure that “seems to rattle out of proportion to its importance.”²⁵

The work of HUMINT collectors in particular suffers from an even higher inflation of expectations.²⁶ The commonly heard joke that HUMINT collectors use “jedi mind tricks” to penetrate the insurgent mind betrays a commonly held belief that HUMINT collectors can quickly educe truth from deceit. Once an insurgent is detained, the commander assumes his HUMINT collector will shortly “break” the detainee in interrogation and produce a fountain of information leading to follow-on targets. Yet as any honest interrogator would admit, a definite “break” is an extremely rare occurrence, particularly when interrogating through a translator.²⁷ Additionally, in contrast to signals intelligence (SIGINT) and imagery intelligence (IMINT), HUMINT responds slowly to tasking, for a hastily organized source meet can jeopardize years of built-up trust.²⁸ Further, HUMINT is filtered through faulty human cognition at more points

21 See Flynn et al., 23.

22 See Kilcullen, “Twenty-Eight Articles”, 9.

23 Quoted in Christopher Andrew, *For the President’s Eyes Only: Secret Intelligence and the American Presidency from Washington to Bush* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 256.

24 Lowenthal, “Intelligence in Transition: Analysis after September 11 and Iraq,” in *Analyzing Intelligence: Origins, Obstacles, and Innovations*, ed. Roger Z. George and James B. Bruce (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2008), 229.

25 Sherman Kent, *Strategic Intelligence for American World Policy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1949), 194.

26 “Of all the intelligence disciplines, human intelligence is the most coveted by intelligence consumers because of its prominence in the culture of intelligence, but it is also probably the most idiosyncratic and unpredictable.” James J. Wirtz and Jon J. Rosenwasser, “From Combined Arms to Combined Intelligence: Philosophy, Doctrine, and Operations,” *Intelligence and National Security* 25, no. 6 (December 2010): 735.

27 On the dearth of language and cultural expertise within the HUMINT community see Frederick P. Hitz, “Human Source Intelligence,” in Loch Johnson ed. *Handbook of Intelligence Studies* (London: Routledge 2007), 127-128.

28 “HUMINT is very different from intelligence collection programs based on acoustic, imaging, or other technical sensors. While these collection systems are expensive to build and maintain, they can be refocused relatively quickly on new enemies and new threats once deployed. Refocusing HUMINT assets is a much longer process.” Burton Gerber, “Managing HUMINT: The Need for a New Approach,” in *Transforming U.S. Intelligence*, ed. Jennifer E. Sims and Burton Gerber (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2005), 182.

during the collection process. As a result, HUMINT often acts as an “area fire” weapon, relying upon other forms of intelligence to gain precision.²⁹ It is important here to note that the converse may be true. By analyzing specific requirements and targeting individuals in the population who can fill these gaps, the HUMINT collector can add precision and, perhaps most importantly, context to SIGINT and IMINT reports. The point is that intelligence in conflict is rarely precise and never certain. The “Jedi Mind Trick Pathology” masks this inherent ambiguity and highlights the importance of educating consumers, candidly and constantly, about HUMINT’s capabilities and limitations.

The “Cowboy” Corollary: A related and equally-vexing problem arises if the HUMINT collector becomes convinced that he does, in fact, possess Jedi-like powers. Drawn to the “sexiness” of source operations and envisioning himself as a tactical James Bond, this collector begins to think that the operators exist to serve him. The collector asserts his privileged status by ignoring standard operating procedures, grooming standards, and proper military courtesy. The supported unit rightly chafes under this behavior. They label the collector a “cowboy” and an operational liability. He is now a pariah and his reporting is routinely discounted.

This problem is often exacerbated by a legitimate operational security measure. In order to maintain security and earn the respect of rank-conscious foreign nationals, the collector may be granted official permission to operate under an alternate rank, to “sanitize” his uniform by removing certain identifiers, and to ask higher-ranking officers to treat him as an equal when in the presence of locals. Any cowboy behavior on the part of “Captain John” is thus doubly offensive to the actual infantry captain he supports.

Furthermore, the sensitivities surrounding these measures sometimes result in their being partially adopted (i.e. the collector can sanitize but he cannot assume rank). Such half-measures quickly prove counterproductive. They send a clear message to interested local observers that “one of these things is not like the other”, thereby skylining the collector and subverting his operational security measures. The consumer and the collector quickly recognize the irony, but find few available remedies. Thus, even the professional collector who works hard to avoid the “Cowboy Corollary” may feel its damaging effects.

The “Consumer Has No Clothes” Pathology

The HUMINT collector who, after months of laborious work, is able to uncover what he believes to be “truth” confronts further challenges. All too often, the collector wrongly assumes that intelligence work ends with an email. One need only send out a well-written report, and the rest of the process will take care of itself. This rarely happens, particularly in a counterinsurgency environment where patience is paramount, discretion is often the better part of valor, and the quantity of information quickly outpaces the consumers’ ability to digest it.

Faced with this reality, the collector must then convince—via or in close cooperation with the unit’s intelligence and operations officers—the supported commander to act upon this information. To be clear, the collector is not prescribing operations. The collector is merely

²⁹ On rare occasions HUMINT can “hit the jackpot” by developing a source such as Oleg Penkovsky who provides a wealth of critical information. “Most of the time, however, intelligence provides „cueing“: it provides indications that an opponent is undertaking some sort of initiative before that initiative is fully underway and begins to generate observable activities. Espionage allows intelligence managers to focus collection efforts on the suspected activity.” Wirtz and Rosenwasser, 735. See also, Loch Johnson, “Seven Sins of Strategic Intelligence,” *World Affairs* 146, no. 2 (Fall 1983): 185.

ensuring that the consumer fully digests a report and understands its operational implications. When the commander harbors strong beliefs that run counter to the collector's assessment, this is no easy task. Put more colorfully, the collector may indeed tell the emperor he has no clothes, but "he leaves unaddressed the question of whether the emperor, certain that he is sartorially resplendent, can be convinced otherwise."³⁰ This "non-adhesive" intelligence may be quickly dismissed by the close-minded consumer.³¹ In other words, it is not enough for the collector to "speak truth to power", he must also understand what preexisting biases—on both sides of the collector-consumer dynamic—may affect the production and consumption of that "truth".

The "Friends Like These" Pathology

The unseemly character of many HUMINT sources complicates this task.³² Despite extensive operational security measures, in a counterinsurgency environment, where security concerns restrict free movement and HUMINT collectors require infantry escorts to meeting commanders at the platoon and company level may gradually identify HUMINT sources. Once they peer behind the wizard's curtain, they are often disappointed. The supported counterinsurgent may be shocked to find that these sources are not upright patriots struggling against the forces of insurgent iniquity, but rather the same corrupt policemen, morally ambiguous tribal shayikhs, and former insurgents they deal with every day.³³

Here the consumer does not understand—likely because the collector did not take the time to make him understand—that most of these HUMINT sources, though their motives may be base or based solely on calculated self-interest, have undergone significant operational testing and asset validation procedures to test reliability. In other cases, where supported commanders ask for more information on HUMINT sources and are rebuffed, they may assume that the HUMINT collector does not want to admit dealing with an unsavory source. In this case the need to compartmentalize information to protect HUMINT sources, however legitimate, creates "doubt as to the validity of the producers" [collectors'] findings."³⁴ In either case, HUMINT collectors' association with "friends like these"—real or perceived—causes supported commanders to question source reliability and HUMINT reporting.

The "Bad News Bearer" Pathology

The collector who is able to strike an appropriate balance and convincingly demonstrate his relevance—satisfying a commander's need for political and cultural knowledge without compromising his limited HUMINT assets—confronts yet another pathology. President Lyndon Johnson best described this pathology in a different context: "Policy making is like milking a fat

³⁰ Richard Immerman, "Intelligence and Strategy: Historicizing Psychology, Policy, and Politics," *Diplomatic History* 32, no. 1 (January 2008), 3. Consider also the words of Henry Kissinger in response to an unheeded intelligence warning: "Well, you warned me, but you didn't convince me." Quoted in Roger Z. George, "The Art of Strategy and Intelligence," in *Analyzing Intelligence: Origins, Obstacles, and Innovations*, 113.

³¹ "Indeed, no shortcoming of strategic intelligence is more often cited than the self-delusion of policymakers who brush aside—or bend—facts that fail to conform with their Weltanschauung." Johnson, 182.

³² "Any good source on terrorist operations will fit the description of the unsavory individual...terrorists and their supporters are involved in human rights violations." Gerber, 189. See also Wirtz and Rosenwasser, 735-736

³³ John Le Carre's Alee Leamas summed this pathology up nicely: "What do you think spies are: priests, saints and martyrs? They're a squalid procession of vain fools, traitors too, yes; pansies, sadists and drunkards, people who play cowboys and Indians to brighten their rotten lives. Do you think they sit like monks in London, balancing the rights and wrongs?" John Le Carre, *The Spy Who Came In From the Cold* (London, UK: Victor Gollancz, 1963), 246.

³⁴ Kent, 191.

cow. You see the milk coming out, you press more and the milk bubbles and flows, and just as the bucket is full, the cow with its tail whips the bucket and all is spilled. That's what CIA does to policy making.”³⁵

As the counterinsurgent’s security efforts begin to take hold, the HUMINT collector’s reporting correspondingly begins to focus less on enemy-centric information and more on latent sources of instability such as corruption within the host-nation security forces and frustration among the populace. Whereas before the HUMINT collector provided targets that the supported unit could “action” (e.g. terrorists and improvised explosive devices), now he becomes the bearer of bad news. The collector reports undesirable or unwelcome information that serves only to embarrass the counterinsurgent force and prove that their efforts to win the support of the population are not working. Here HUMINT collectors unwittingly complicate the supported commander’s natural desire to demonstrate progress. Additionally, such unwelcome feedback may heighten a commander’s cognitive dissonance—intensifying previous attitudes and behavior that are at odds with new information.³⁶

Consider the following scenario. The counterinsurgent commander receives a report from his HUMINT collectors. This report claims that the three highest-ranking members of local, host-nation police force are involved in opium smuggling. For the clear-eyed commander, this is not surprising—counterinsurgency not only makes for strange bedfellows but also demands a certain level of tolerance for non-lethal corruption. Yet that same commander soon receives a call from his boss asking why such drug-smuggling persists. After all, this is damaging the local economy; it cannot be tolerated! More significantly, his boss asks the commander what he intends to do about it. Though bullets are not flying, the sky is suddenly falling and the commander finds himself afflicted by his own version of the *Office Space* pathology. If he is ruthlessly honest, he may insist on doing nothing. He knows that by taking a hard line on drug-smuggling and removing the police leadership he risks upsetting the fragile balance of power in his area of operations and unleashing the violence his counterinsurgents worked so hard to suppress. Yet more often than not, he must do *something*. The commander realizes that judging his local partners through a lens of moral certitude is not a viable option. If he is forced by his higher headquarters to follow such an approach, local stability may suffer. In either case, he may curse the HUMINT report that forced him to deal with this issue in the first place. What is more, without being aware of it, the commander is now more cognitively closed to future forms of unwelcome feedback.³⁷

The “Tyranny of Format” Pathology

The HUMINT report containing “good news” is nonetheless delivered in an archaic, Cold War-era package. This system is well suited to relaying technical information about Soviet missile factories, but is inadequate for conveying timely and relevant information about the socio-political factors of concern to the modern counterinsurgent. The doctrinally “correct” process for customer-collector interface via Ad-Hoc Requirements (AHRs), HUMINT Collection Requirements (HCRs) and evaluations is too slow and cumbersome. The format and vocabulary

35 Quoted in Richard K. Betts, “Analysis, War, and Decision: Why Intelligence Failures Are Inevitable,” in *Intelligence and National Security: The Secret World of Spies*, ed. Loch K. Johnson and James J. Wirtz (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 123.

36 Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979): 404-406.

37 See Jervis, 404. I would like to thank Josh Geltzer for suggesting this connection.

of HUMINT reports themselves are particularly problematic. Rather than providing concise descriptions of issues affecting the counterinsurgent, HUMINT reports are a peculiar mix of seemingly-vague source descriptions, disjointed and incomplete information, and endless qualifiers. The commander seeking clear answers and pithy analysis finds instead a document that appears intentionally impenetrable. The commander is often unaware that the collector, far from being deliberately confusing, is adhering to the requirements of pre-established report formats.

Additionally, the collector has been specifically trained to report exactly what the source has told him, however outlandish it may be, adding context and qualifiers in oft-ignored “field comments” that come at the end of the report. In this case, the commander’s ignorance is the collector’s fault—the latter must teach the former how to comprehend the language of HUMINT reporting. This is a peculiar idiom in which vague source description taxonomy is designed to relay precise information about a source’s accuracy and reliability. This reliability is based upon an extensive, outside review of the source’s complete history of reporting. Commanders that understand this vocabulary confront another problem emanating from the collector’s end—too many cases of source descriptions being misleading or just plain wrong. Reports will be discredited on the basis of a couple unintelligible sentences contained therein. This betrays a larger problem: too many collectors simply do not know how to write and they do not get adequate help from their officers-in-charge (OIC), senior enlisted, and reports officers (perhaps because they have the same problem).

Moreover, the commander is only seeing a small fraction of the reports that the collector has to produce. The information that is disseminated in a one-page intelligence report may have taken five source meets to collect. Each of these meets necessitates a more-detailed report describing the event and assessing the source’s continued reliability. Hence the axiom familiar to all HUMINT collectors that every hour spent on the streets conducting the “sexy” work of military source operations entails five hours spent in the office conducting the decidedly unattractive art of source administration. Given this cumbersome process and confusing format, it is unsurprising that the operator and the collector alike often prefer informal, email assessments and frank, face-to-face discussions over formal intelligence reports.

The “Two Masters” Pathology

As the HUMINT collector churns out reports, he is fighting his own three-block war: (1) he is fighting against the impatience of the supported commander, who often needs formal, published intelligence reports to justify a raid and rarely enjoys waiting on the cycle of collection, drafting, approval and dissemination; (2) he is fighting against his own HUMINT chain of command, which is obsessed with report minutia and seems to have little respect for the operational demands of the supported unit; and (3) in both cases he is fighting against time and exhaustion.

This brings yet another pathology into harsh relief: the HUMINT collector works for (at least) two bosses. The HUMINT collector most often operates in direct support (DS) to an infantry battalion or in general support (GS) to a regimental combat team, rather than operating as an attached asset that is organic to the consumer. This means that the HUMINT collector must answer to both the supported counterinsurgent and his separate, HUMINT chain of command. The former feeds, houses, and provides transportation to the HUMINT collector, but,

critically, cannot task the collector directly.³⁸ The latter writes the HUMINT collector's professional evaluations and provides him with HUMINT specific guidance and gear. These two entities are ostensibly on the same team, but their immediate demands may pull collectors in two different directions. For example, the operational commander often requests the senior HUMINT collector's presence during his many tribal engagements. Recognizing that time spent attending lengthy tribal engagements is time not spent providing guidance to junior collectors, attending to his sources, and writing quality reports, the HUMINT commander resists this trend. He views these tribal engagements as a wasteful employment of his senior collector.

Alternatively, the supported commander may wish to rapidly share HUMINT with local police to drive operations while the HUMINT chain of command requires a lengthy administrative process for declassifying and sharing key reports, even if these reports were over-classified to begin with. True, this pathology is endemic to any unit operating in DS or GS, but it is particularly potent in the case of HUMINT because it is often more difficult to measure and quantify the ephemeral context that HUMINT delivers (e.g. the *Office Space* pathology).

The “Agreed Activities” Pathology

From 1942-1953, U.S. military forces in Europe and Far East wary of growing communist subversion became increasingly unwilling to rely upon the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) and its successor, the CIA, to satisfy their HUMINT needs.³⁹ As a result, these units developed organic HUMINT collection mechanisms. The term “agreed activities” came to describe these military collection activities—as distinct from those of their civilian counterparts—“and a more inappropriate name would be hard to imagine.”⁴⁰ Due to the lack of formal rules governing the separation of military and civilian activities, clandestine military collection intruded upon CIA collection, creating an atmosphere of mistrust and unprofessionalism.⁴¹

³⁸ This distinction is subtle yet critical. The commander cannot specifically determine/alter the collector's operations/employment nor saddle him with extracurricular responsibilities. He can, however, task the collector indirectly through his intelligence requirements. These are tasking for all collectors (HUMINT, SIGINT, IMINT, reconnaissance, scout snipers, and even the infantryman) supporting that commander. For this to be effective, the commander and his intelligence officer must identify the priority of requirements, craft them clearly, and revisit them as the deployment unfolds and the situation on the ground changes. For his part, the collector must treat these requirements as more than a motivational powerpoint slide. That is to say, the collector must strike a difficult balance. On one hand he must go beyond the letter of the law and treat these requirements as though they are direct taskings, planning his collection operations accordingly. On the other he must protect his “editorial independence” from the supported commander—something he would not be able to do easily if he were attached to the supported commander rather than serving in a direct support role. I would like to thank Matt Pottinger for suggesting this point.

³⁹ “Today a secret intelligence agency and activity in order to be successful and even in order to compete on even terms with its adversaries must be an underground agency, not an Office of Strategic Services with its baseball teams, newspaper publicity, bureaucracy, million-dollar budgets and open or obvious super-secret methods of operations, which have been the joke of the world for the past few years.” John Grombach, “For State,” Box 2, Clippings Re: Govt, etc. Personalities, RG 263: Records of the CIA, Grombach Organization (“The Pond”), Subject and Country Files, 1920-1963, P Entry 12, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) II, College Park, MD, 4. This entire “Grombach Collection” provides a fascinating account of the friction between the OSS (and later CIA) and the Army’s HUMINT collectors.

⁴⁰ Wayne G. Jackson, *Allen Welsh Dulles as Director of Central Intelligence 26 February 1953-29 November 1961: Volume I Allen Dulles, The Man*, (Langley, V.A.: Central Intelligence Agency Historical Staff, 1994), 114. The term originally emerged from National Security Council Intelligence Directive 5 issued on December 12, 1947, which gave the Director of Central Intelligence responsibility for all espionage conducted abroad “except for certain agreed activities by other Departments and Agencies.”

⁴¹ The military services focused on acquiring a large number of (often dubious) sources while the CIA focused on a smaller number of sources they considered to be more reliable. The military HUMINT collectors also feared that if the CIA learned about a promising operation, they would attempt to take it over. The level of unprofessionalism culminated in the Trudeau

A similar phenomenon persists in the present-day. As counterinsurgency blurs the line between tactical and strategic information, tactical HUMINT collectors (e.g. military collectors) come into increasingly frequent contact with Special Operations Forces’ HUMINT assets and their strategic counterparts (e.g. CIA and DIA case officers). Though they may operate from different bases, these two entities often collect against similar requirements, producing reports on the same area addressing the same issues. Their relationship can be antagonistic. Tactical collectors may be jealous of the assets strategic collectors have at their disposal. So too do they bristle as strategic collectors regularly report on “their AO” yet rarely visit it. Perhaps most significantly, tactical collectors know (and fear) that strategic collectors have the authority to “poach” their sources if an operation demands it. In some cases, tactical and strategic collectors are even running the same sources without being aware. Regardless of the cause, this sense of AO propriety, however well intentioned, is unproductive. The absence of a cooperative working relationship heightens the risk of duplicative, circular reporting and increases uncertainty for the supported commander.

Curing Pathologies

These pathologies suggest that the trouble with HUMINT is that it involves humans. As such, it requires a unique acceptance of ambiguity, risk, and failure mixed with a bit of trust. Counterinsurgency doctrine speaks of trust primarily in the context of winning the support of the local populace. This essay has argued that for the specialized HUMINT collector, gaining the trust of the supported consumer is equally if not more important to his success.

Earning trust may seem elusive, but the good news for the counterinsurgent is that this essay deliberately paints a worst-case, abnormal state of affairs. By focusing exclusively on pathologies, it ignores the many more common cases of collector-consumer cooperation. Yet where pathologies persist, even in their smallest form, they are puzzling. On one hand, intelligence failures are a failure of command. Consumer-crafted information requirements drive the collection effort, not the other way around.⁴² Thus, by blaming HUMINT collectors for larger counterinsurgency setbacks, the commander is essentially damning himself.⁴³ On the other hand, HUMINT collectors are some of the most valuable counterinsurgents, specifically chosen for their written and verbal communication skills. Their inability to demonstrate relevance or reduce uncertainty for the supported counterinsurgent is inexcusable.

Indeed, the most striking aspect of these persistent pathologies is that while some are inherent and unavoidable (i.e. “Friends Like These” and “Bad News”), the rest are self-induced and amenable to correction. While there is no clear prescription for “curing pathologies”—or at least not one that comes, like this essay, only from the collector’s perspective—doing so demands two changes in the way we conceptualize collector-consumer relations. The first is simply to recognize the importance of this dynamic. The collector-consumer relationship is a pass-fail for the entire counterinsurgency effort. It does not establish itself naturally and it never

Affair, during which Army G-2 General Arthur G. Trudeau criticized the German intelligence service in front of German Chancellor Adenauer without consulting the DCI.

⁴² I would like to thank Nate Lampert for suggesting this point.

⁴³ Indeed, because this article is written from a HUMINT perspective, it may unintentionally suggest that pathologies are triggered only from the HUMINT side of the relationship. This is not the case. Any commander who categorically concludes that his collectors are cowboys likely does not understand his own role in triggering and exacerbating one (if not more) of these pathologies. I would like to thank Peter Kingston for suggesting this point.

goes on autopilot.⁴⁴ As both sides deal with pathologies, they must realize that for all the time and money spent on structured analytic methods and high-tech collection toys, the *people* of intelligence deserve the most attention. No process, tool, or “fusion center” has yet been invented that can eliminate the risks posed by a close-minded commander or a cowboy collector.

The second conceptual change is to move away from the “producer-consumer” model entirely. This commercial language suggests the ideal relationship between intelligence producers and consumers could somehow be reduced to a supply-demand graph.⁴⁵ The assumption here is that intelligence is merely a service, one in which the decision-maker does not play a role but rather waits to be presented a final product. Yet as these pathologies remind us, the producer (whether collector or analyst) offers no silver bullet solutions, no prescriptions for truth. Rather, good intelligence is accumulative. It manifests itself not in a single product, but through a process of protracted discussion. Within this conversation, most often the *producer* is the *product*. Even the best intelligence product cannot substitute for frank, face-to-face discussions between experienced consumers and collectors.

Moving from concept to practice is more difficult, but certainly not impossible. To begin, both collector and consumer must come to the table with more humility, the former on his ability to educe “truth” and the latter on his ability to dispassionately digest information. Consumers must receive better formal training on how to consume, with emphasis on the capabilities and limitations of HUMINT collectors prior to and throughout a deployment. Collectors must be taught to go beyond simply asking consumers what their information requirements are, and instead, helping to shape those requirements.⁴⁶ Similarly, in the absence of a more timely, responsive, and user-friendly formal reporting process, collectors must recognize that pressing “send” on a report is not the end of a HUMINT operation. Rather, it initiates a continuous, informal process wherein collectors (1) contextualize reports so that critical information is not suppressed by the “Tyranny of Format” and (2) aggressively seek consumer feedback so that future collection is more than “marginally relevant” to the overall counterinsurgency effort.

Within this process, both sides must recognize that assumption is the mother of all evils. A collector cannot assume that the consumer has seen a report and a consumer cannot assume that a collector has seen a requirement. They must talk—in person whenever possible—in order to capture the intangibles and emphasis of each other’s work.⁴⁷ This prescription may seem like a cop-out, too ephemeral to be effective. However, until a more concrete cure is discovered, it has at least one redeeming quality: the next time a consumer asks “What would you say...ya do here?” the collector will be present to answer.

44 As Sherman Kent said, reflecting on producer-consumer relations in general, this relationship is a product of great effort, one “likely to disappear when the effort is relaxed,” 180.

45 See Andrew Rathmell, “Towards Postmodern Intelligence,” *Intelligence and National Security* 17, no. 3 (September 2002): 98, wherein he argues that “the classic concept of an ‘intelligence factory’ is as dated as its industrial counterparts. The knowledge economy, driven by technology and social change, is changing the intelligence business just as its changing commerce, government and the armed forces.”

46 I would like to thank Nate Lampert for suggesting this point.

47 See the discussion of nightly “fireside chats” found in Flynn et al., 14.

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